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UCC 'Spotlight' Discussion Guide a Meaningful Conversation Starter

Written by ***Barb Powell***

Download the "Spotlight" discussion guide

Sexual abuse of children, teens and adults by church leaders is a serious problem brought back into focus recently by the heralded film, "Spotlight." To aid thoughtful dialogue about issues highlighted in the movie, the United Church of Christ has released a film discussion guide for use by churches interested in addressing ways to ensure members of our faith communities are not vulnerable to abuse.

The story of how the Boston Globe uncovered the massive scandal of child molestation and cover-up in the local Catholic Archdiocese, "Spotlight" is a top contender for the Best Picture Oscar and recently took home the best ensemble cast award from the Screen Actors Guild awards.

"'Spotlight' is indeed a cautionary tale for us all. While non-Catholics might be tempted to walk away from the theater with just a tinge of self-righteousness, assuming that this is a Catholic problem, don't give into that temptation," said the Rev. Marie M. Fortune, a UCC minister who heads the Seattle-based FaithTrust Institute, which is working to end sexual and domestic abuse. "The fact is that sexual abuse of children, teens, and adults by those designated as faith leaders is a serious and disturbing reality in every faith community. No exceptions."

The discussion guide, developed by the UCC's Local Church Ministries as part of the denomination's 2016 multimedia campaigns tied to its core mission, encourages UCC members and leaders to see the film and then reflect on its implications for their local churches and the denomination as a whole.

"'Spotlight' is a wonderfully engaging, yet haunting, film," said the Rev. J. Bennett Guess, executive minister of Local Church Ministries. "It is the perfect movie for church audiences to see together and then discuss how our churches are taking the necessary steps to protect children and other vulnerable people who are in our care."

Several churches across the UCC, including Church of the Beatitudes UCC in Phoenix, Little River UCC in northern Virginia, University Congregational UCC in Seattle, Plymouth UCC in Lawrence, Kan., and Pass-a-Grille Community UCC in St. Petersburg, Fla., are already planning to distribute the guide and encourage "Spotlight" discussion groups.

"I have already spoken to the congregation concerning the film, and I have urged that they view this movie," said the Rev. Don Longbottom, senior minister of Church of the Beatitudes UCC. "From my perspective, the critical issue [raised in the film] is the manner in which institutions serve themselves first without regard for their members or clients. There must always be the strongest safeguards in place in order to protect the vulnerable."

The discussion groups also fit well with safe church guidelines already in place in congregations.

"We have a deep commitment to living out our Safer Church guidelines as a church culture of awareness, and not just a policy on paper, and this project fits that practice to a tee," added the Rev. Amy Roon, pastor of University Congregational UCC.

In addition to questions for congregations, the guide features sections on clergy ethics for UCC regional committees on ministry, and for UCC ministers and those studying for ministerial authorization in the UCC. It also provides an overview of the UCC's systems of accountability, learning and support, and links to UCC and partner resources.

"Ethics matter to every person, regardless of religious identification," said the Rev. Holly MillerShank, leader of the UCC's ministerial excellence, support and authorization team. "Using the study guide after seeing the movie is a timely way to engage in meaningful dialogue about how ethics are formed and lived out. Churches and clergy will benefit from using this resource as a launching point for conversations that explore the impact of trust, loyalty, and truth."

Download the "Spotlight" discussion guide.